IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

MARCO RAMIREZ,

Petitioner,

vs.

BEN CURRY, Warden.,

Respondent.
_____/

No. C 05-0724 WHA (PR)

ORDER DENYING PETITION FOR WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS

This is a habeas corpus case filed by a state prisoner pursuant to 28 U.S.C. 2254. The petition is directed to denial of parole.

The court ordered respondent to show cause why the writ should not be granted. Respondent has filed an answer and a memorandum of points and authorities in support of it, and has lodged the record with the court. Petitioner has responded with a traverse. For the reasons set forth below, the petition is **DENIED**.

DISCUSSION

A. STANDARD OF REVIEW

A district court may not grant a petition challenging a state conviction or sentence on the basis of a claim that was reviewed on the merits in state court unless the state court's adjudication of the claim: "(1) resulted in a decision that was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States; or (2) resulted in a decision that was based on an unreasonable

determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented in the State court proceeding." 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d). The first prong applies both to questions of law and to mixed questions of law and fact, *Williams (Terry) v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 407-09 (2000), while the second prong applies to decisions based on factual determinations, *Miller-El v. Cockrell*, 537 U.S. 322, 340 (2003).

A state court decision is "contrary to" Supreme Court authority, that is, falls under the first clause of § 2254(d)(1), only if "the state court arrives at a conclusion opposite to that reached by [the Supreme] Court on a question of law or if the state court decides a case differently than [the Supreme] Court has on a set of materially indistinguishable facts." *Williams (Terry)*, 529 U.S. at 412-13. A state court decision is an "unreasonable application of" Supreme Court authority, falls under the second clause of § 2254(d)(1), if it correctly identifies the governing legal principle from the Supreme Court's decisions but "unreasonably applies that principle to the facts of the prisoner's case." *Id.* at 413. The federal court on habeas review may not issue the writ "simply because that court concludes in its independent judgment that the relevant state-court decision applied clearly established federal law erroneously or incorrectly." *Id.* at 411. Rather, the application must be "objectively unreasonable" to support granting the writ. *See id.* at 409.

"Factual determinations by state courts are presumed correct absent clear and convincing evidence to the contrary." *Miller-El*, 537 U.S. at 340. This presumption is not altered by the fact that the finding was made by a state court of appeals, rather than by a state trial court. *Sumner v. Mata*, 449 U.S. 539, 546-47 (1981); *Bragg v. Galaza*, 242 F.3d 1082, 1087 (9th Cir.), *amended*, 253 F.3d 1150 (9th Cir. 2001). A petitioner must present clear and convincing evidence to overcome § 2254(e)(1)'s presumption of correctness; conclusory assertions will not do. *Id.*

Under 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)(2), a state court decision "based on a factual determination will not be overturned on factual grounds unless objectively unreasonable in light of the evidence presented in the state-court proceeding." *Miller-El*, 537 U.S. at 340; *see also Torres*

v. Prunty, 223 F.3d 1103, 1107 (9th Cir. 2000).

When there is no reasoned opinion from the highest state court to consider the petitioner's claims, the court looks to the last reasoned opinion. *See Ylst v. Nunnemaker*, 501 U.S. 797, 801-06 (1991); *Shackleford v. Hubbard*, 234 F.3d 1072, 1079, n. 2 (9th Cir.2000).

B. ISSUES PRESENTED

Petitioner was convicted of attempted murder in 1993. He received a sentence of life plus one year in prison. In 2002 he was denied parole; it is the parole decision he challenges here. He alleges that he has exhausted these claims by way of state habeas petitions. As grounds for federal habeas relief petitioner contends that (1) his due process rights were denied when the Board denied parole for a second time based on the circumstances of his crime; (2) the denial was not supported by sufficient evidence; and (3) his due process rights were violated by the Board's failure to comply with state law.

Along with denying the validity of petitioner's claims, respondent contends that California prisoner have no liberty interest in parole and that if they do, the only due process protections available are a right to be heard and a right to be informed of the basis for the denial – that is, respondent contends there is no due process right to have the result supported by sufficient evidence. Because these contentions go to whether petitioner has any due process rights at all in connection with parole, and if he does, what those rights are, they will addressed first.

1. RESPONDENT'S CONTENTIONS

The Fourteenth Amendment provides that no state may "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law." U.S. Const., amend. XIV, § 1.

a. LIBERTY INTEREST

Respondent contends that California prisoners have no liberty interest in parole. Respondent is incorrect that *Sandin v. Conner*, 515 U.S. 472 (1995), applies to parole decisions, *see Biggs v. Terhune*, 334 F.3d 910, 914 (9th Cir. 2003) (*Sandin* "does not affect the creation of liberty interests in parole under *Greenholtz* and *Allen*."), and, applying the correct analysis, the

California parole statute does create a liberty interest protected by due process, *see McQuillion v. Duncan*, 306 F.3d 895, 902 (9th Cir. 2002) ("California's parole scheme gives rise to a cognizable liberty interest in release on parole."). Respondent's claim to the contrary is without merit.

b. DUE-PROCESS PROTECTIONS

Respondent contends that even if California prisoners do have a liberty interest in parole, the due process protections to which they are entitled by clearly-established Supreme Court authority are limited to notice, an opportunity to be heard, and a statement of reasons for denial. That is, he contends there is no due process right to have the decision supported by "some evidence." This position, however, has been rejected by the Ninth Circuit, which has held that the Supreme Court has clearly established that a parole board's decision deprives a prisoner of due process if the board's decision is not supported by "some evidence in the record", or is "otherwise arbitrary." *Irons v. Carey*, 479 F.3d 658, 662 (9th Cir. 2007) (applying "some evidence" standard used for disciplinary hearings as outlined in *Superintendent v. Hill*, 472 U.S. 445-455 (1985)); *McQuillion*, 306 F.3d at 904 (same). The evidence underlying the Board's decision must also have "some indicia of reliability." *McQuillion*, 306 F.3d at 904; *Biggs*, 334 F.3d at 915. The some evidence standard identified in *Hill* is clearly established federal law in the parole context for purposes of § 2254(d). *See Sass*, 461 F.3d at 1128-1129.

2. PETITIONER'S CLAIMS

a. SECOND DENIAL OF REVIEW BASED ON CIRCUMSTANCES OF CRIME

In a line of relatively recent cases the Ninth Circuit has discussed the constitutionality of denying parole when the only basis for denial is the circumstances of the offense. *See Hayward v. Marshall*, 512 F.3d 536, (9th Cir. 2008); *Irons v. Carey*, 505 F.3d 846, 852-54 (9th Cir. 2007); *Sass v. California Bd. of Prison Terms*, 461 F.3d 1123, 1129 (9th Cir. 2006); *Biggs v. Terhune*, 334 F.3d 910, 915-17 (9th Cir. 2003).

In *Biggs* the court said that it might violate due process if the Board were to continue to deny parole to a prisoner because of the facts of his or her offense and in the face of evidence of rehabilitation. 334 F.3d at 916-17. No legal rationale for this statement was provided, and it

was unclear whether the court was suggesting that the continued denial of parole would be a new sort of due process violation or whether it was simply expressing the thought that with the passage of time the nature of the offense could cease to be "some evidence" that the prisoner would be a danger if paroled.[1] This ambiguity was helpfully cleared up in *Irons*, where the court clearly treated a "some evidence" claim as different from a "*Biggs* claim." *Irons*, 505 F.3d at 853-54. It appears, putting together the brief discussions in *Biggs* and *Irons*, that the court meant that at some point denial of parole based on long-ago and unchangeable factors, when overwhelmed with positive evidence of rehabilitation, would be fundamentally unfair and violate due process. As the dissenters from denial of rehearing en banc in *Irons* point out, in the Ninth Circuit what otherwise might be dictum is controlling authority if the issue was presented and decided, even if not strictly "necessary" to the decision. *Irons v. Carey*, 506 F.3d 951, 952 (9th Cir. Nov. 6, 2007) (dissent from denial of rehearing en banc) (citing and discussing *Barapind v. Enomoto*, 400 F.3d 744, 751 n. 8 (9th Cir.2005)).

Depending on whether the discussion of dictum in the dissent from denial of rehearing en banc in *Irons* is correct, it thus may be that the Ninth Circuit has recognized that due process right, which for convenience will be referred to in this opinion as a "*Biggs* claim." Here, petitioner's first issue is a "*Biggs* claim," in that he contends that simply using the circumstances of his offense as grounds for denial for the second time violates due process, separate from his "some evidence" claim, which is issue two, below.

Petitioner has failed to establish the predicate for his *Biggs* claim. For one thing, a second denial based on the circumstances of the crime does not amount to the repeated denials which the *Biggs* court suggested might violate due process. For another, petitioner's parole was not denied solely because of the circumstances of his offense, but also because of his failure to "upgrade vocationally" in prison and his failure to participate in sufficient therapy to give the

---

[1] The Supreme Court has clearly established that a parole board's decision deprives a prisoner of due process if the board's decision is not supported by "some evidence in the record," or is "otherwise arbitrary." *Sass v. California Bd. of Prison Terms*, 461 F.3d 1123, 1129 (9th Cir. 2006) (adopting "some evidence" standard for disciplinary hearings outlined in *Superintendent v. Hill*, 472 U.S. 445, 454-55 (1985).

Board confidence that he understood the cause and effects of his offense (exh. 2 at 58-70). And finally, assuming for purposes of this discussion that *Biggs* and *Irons* recognized an abstract due process right not to have parole repeatedly denied on the basis of the facts of one's crime and in the face of extensive evidence of rehabilitation, and also assuming arguendo that the right was violated in petitioner's case, petitioner still cannot obtain relief on this theory, because there is no clearly-established United States Supreme Court authority recognizing a "*Biggs* claim." The state courts' rulings therefore could not be contrary to, or an unreasonable application of, clearly-established Supreme Court authority.

b. "SOME EVIDENCE"

Petitioner contends that denial of parole was not supported by "some evidence" and thus violated his due process rights. Ascertaining whether the some evidence standard is met "does not require examination of the entire record, independent assessment of the credibility of witnesses, or weighing of the evidence. Instead, the relevant question is whether there is any evidence in the record that could support the conclusion reached by the disciplinary board." *Hill*, 472 U.S. at 455; *Sass*, 461 F.3d at 1128. The some evidence standard is minimal, and assures that "the record is not so devoid of evidence that the findings of the disciplinary board were without support or otherwise arbitrary." *Sass*, 461 F.3d at 1129 (quoting *Hill*, 472 U.S. at 457).

Because this was only the second parole consideration hearing, and because at the time of the hearing petitioner had served only nine years of his sentence of life with the possibility of parole, the circumstances of the offense still were entitled to very considerable weight in deciding if releasing him would endanger the community. Petitioner attempted to murder his ex-girlfriend, who was going out with another man (exh. 2 at 9-11). He stabbed her repeatedly, then walked away; when he realized she was still alive, he returned and stabbed her again repeatedly, and taunted her by saying that her new boyfriend was leaving her to die (*ibid.*) When police arrived he refused to move away from the victim, preventing administration of aid (*id.* at 11). These circumstances, considered in light of the relatively short time of imprisonment, amounted to some evidence to support the conclusion that petitioner should not

be paroled.

In addition, there was evidence that petitioner had not upgraded vocationally in prison and that he was in need of additional therapy (exh. 60-61). There thus was more than "some evidence" to support the denial, and the state courts' rejection of this claim was not contrary to, nor an unreasonable application of, clearly-established Supreme Court authority.

c. DUE PROCESS AND COMPLIANCE WITH STATE LAW

Petitioner also contends that the Board did not comply with state law in that it failed to set a "uniform term" for him to serve, and that this failure to follow state law violated due process. This contention is without merit, the California Supreme Court now having held that the obligation to set a uniform term is triggered only when the Board finds that a prisoner is suitable for parole. *See In re Dannenberg*, 34 Cal. 4th 1061, 1070-71 (Cal.), *cert. denied*, 126 S. Ct. 92 (2005); 15 Cal. Code Regs. § 2403(a) ("[t]he panel shall set a base term for each life prisoner who is found suitable for parole"). For that reason, the rejection of this claim by the state courts was not contrary to, or an unreasonable application of, clearly-established Supreme Court authority.

CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of habeas corpus is **DENIED**. The clerk shall close the file.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Dated: March 24, 2008.

WILLIAM ALSUP
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

G:\PRO-SE\WHA\HC.05\RAMIREZ724.RUL.wpd